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AUTHOR	Katz, Lilian G.
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ABSTRACT

The concept of developmental appropriateness can be applied to the assessment of young children. Clarifying the main purpose for which children are assessed can help determine what kinds of assessments would be most appropriate. Assessment of individual children might serve one of the following purposes: (1) to determine progress on significant developmental achievements; (2) to make placement or promotion decisions; (3) to diagnose learning and teaching problems; (4) to help in instruction and curriculum decisions; (5) to serve as a basis for reporting to parents; and (6) to assist a child with assessing his or her own progress. One should keep in mind that (1) plans, strategies, and assessment instruments are differentially suited for each of the potential purposes of assessment; (2) an overall assessment should include the four categories of educational goals: knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings; and (3) assessments made during children's informal work and play are most likely to minimize the potential errors of various assessment strategies. All methods of assessment make errors, and awareness of the potential errors of each method can help minimize errors in interpretation. As they plan assessments of young children's learning, parents and educators may want to: (1) recognize the limitations of report cards and grades; (2) assess aspects of children's functioning that have real meaning; (3) encourage children to assess their own work; (4) encourage children to assess their own progress; and (5) involve children in evaluating the class community. While educators cannot be accountable for all children being above average or for all children being first, they are accountable for applying all teaching strategies and efforts known to be effective and appropriate for the learning situation at hand. Assessment procedures should therefore indicate which of the strategies and resources available and judged appropriate have been employed to help each individual child. (LPP)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

University of Illinois • 51 Gerty Drive • Champaign, IL 61820-7469
(217) 333-1386 • (800) 583-4135 • ericeece@uiuc.edu

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A Developmental Approach to Assessment of Young Children

Lilian G. Katz

For more than a decade, early childhood educators have been discussing issues of curriculum and teaching methods in terms of their developmental appropriateness. The concept of developmental appropriateness can also be extended to issues related to the assessment of children during the early years.

The Purposes of Assessment

Clarifying the main purpose for which young children are assessed can help determine what kinds of assessments would be most appropriate. Assessment of individual children might serve one of the following purposes:

- to determine progress on significant developmental achievements;
- to make placement or promotion decisions;
- to diagnose learning and teaching problems;
- to help in instruction and curriculum decisions;
- to serve as a basis for reporting to parents; and
- to assist a child with assessing his or her own progress.

Decisions regarding the purposes of assessment should begin with discussions among all the stakeholders—parents, educators, and other members of the community—as appropriate. The group may want to keep in mind that (1) plans, strategies, and assessment instruments are differentially suited for each of the potential purposes of assessment; (2) an overall assessment should include the four categories of educational goals: knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings (Katz, 1995); and (3) assessments made during children's informal work and play are most likely to minimize the many potential errors of various assessment strategies.

The Risks of Assessing Young Children

Young children are notoriously poor test-takers: perhaps because they are sometimes confused by being asked questions that they think the tester must already know the answers to! There is reason to suggest that the younger the child being evaluated, assessed, or tested, the more errors are made (Shepard, 1994; Ratcliff, 1995). If this principle is sound, then the younger the children, the greater the risk of assigning false labels to them. Another principle may also be appropriate: the longer children live with a label (a true or false one), the more difficult it may become to discard it.

All methods of assessment make errors: the errors made by formal tests are different from those made by informal or anecdotal records and documentation notes; the errors made by specific checklists of behavioral items are different from those made by holistic impressionistic assessments. Awareness of the potential errors of each evaluation or assessment strategy can help minimize errors in interpretation. It is a good idea to strive for a balance between global or holistic evaluation and detailed specific assessments of young children.

The Assessment of Young Children

As they plan assessments of young children's learning, parents and educators may want to:

Recognize the Limitations of Report Cards and Grades. For several reasons, report cards with letter grades or achievement scores are not appropriate for children at and below the third grade. First, before third grade, the differences in developmental timetables and other factors that contribute to performance are still too unstable, malleable, and varied to achieve reliability. By third grade, however, children's abilities and aptitudes are likely to have stabilized and can be assessed with at least minimal reliability. Second, there is little evidence that grades or scores listed on the report cards of young children contribute positively to those most in need of improvement. Third, while teachers need to know how well a young child is progressing on significant skills and knowledge, and to evaluate such progress, little is known about how parents use such information.

Assess Aspects of Children's Functioning That Have Real Meaning. The items and behaviors assessed should have demonstrable relationships to significant human functioning. For example, the child's knowledge of the names of shapes or of the calendar at age 4 or 5 has little or no practical significance or meaning beyond test performance itself. In addition to assessing young children's social competence, adults should include the assessment of individual children's progress in acquiring desirable dispositions, feelings, skills, and knowledge.

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Documentation is a strategy for recording and presenting such assessments (see Katz & Chard, 1996).

Encourage Children to Assess Their Own Work. Preschoolers and children in the primary grades can be encouraged to assess their own work according to specific criteria such as the clarity, inclusiveness, interest level, comprehensiveness, or aesthetic qualities of the work. They can also be encouraged to consider the standards to be met on these criteria.

Encourage Children to Assess Their Own Progress. From kindergarten on, most children can be encouraged to assess the general progress of their own learning. During teacher–child or teacher–parent–child conferences, children can be encouraged to indicate what mastery and learning they want to focus on during a given period. From time to time, children can then be asked to judge their own progress, using three or four categories. For example, each child can be asked to discuss work she thinks she is making good progress on, what he thinks he needs to concentrate more on, what she wants help with, and other categories nominated by the child. Most children will be quite realistic and sensible when engaging in such self-evaluation. The teacher can help by expressing her own realistic evaluation in a serious and supportive way. In principle, unless children are consulted about their own views of their own progress, they cannot learn to assume some responsibility for it (Katz, 1995).

Involve Children in Evaluating the Class Community. Depending on their ages, children as a group can be encouraged to develop some criteria concerning what they want their classroom life to be like. These criteria are not simply lists of classroom rules. Rather they should be a thoughtful examination of what kind of community the class should be—for example, the extent to which it is a caring, cooperative group, respectful of individual differences; the extent to which it is a helpful community of scholars; and the extent to which it meets any other dimensions of classroom life the children and their teacher think are important.

Periodically, the teacher or a child can lead the group in a discussion concerning how well they are doing on these criteria as a class, and what additions or modifications of the criteria might be tried. Such discussions should be directed toward the development of positive and constructive suggestions.

Conclusion

Whenever a measurement is applied to a group of people of any age, especially a group that is diverse in background, experience, aptitude, development, culture, language, and interests, some will rank higher and some lower than others on any item assessed. All measures yield such differences, and it is thus statistically impossible for all those subjected to the same assessment to be above average! However, failure to evaluate and assess children's progress might mean that some children will be deprived of needed intervention with special services at a time when these services can do the most good. While educators cannot be accountable for all children being above average or for all children being first, they are accountable for applying all teaching strategies and efforts known to be effective and appropriate for the learning situation at hand. Assessment procedures should therefore indicate which of the strategies and resources available and judged appropriate have been employed to help each individual child.

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